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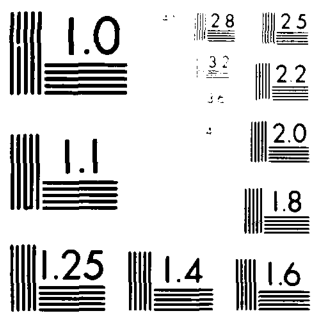

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HOW TO CHAIR EFFECTIVE MEETINGS:

A Guide To Group Problem Solving

Seminar
for
International Bank for Reconstruction
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HOW TO CHAIR EFFECTIVE MEETINGS: A GUIDE TO GROUP PROBLEM SOLVING,

John P./ Fry
~~and~~
David S./ Bushnell

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Human Resources Research Organization
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Meetings are a necessary part of any organization. Whether they are effective or ineffective depends largely on how meeting chairpersons plan and conduct them. The content of this Guide focuses on the development and improvement of management behaviors associated with chairing meetings.

Although meetings take a variety of forms (e.g., exchange of information, problem-solving, decision-making, negotiation, etc.), the emphasis throughout this Guide will be on a basic set of behavioral skills associated with facilitating problem-solving meetings. It will be demonstrated that the skills and techniques of facilitating group problem-solving meetings can be used to improve the chairing of any type of meeting.

The basic assumption underlying a participative approach to group problem-solving is that it provides a "win/win" resolution to conflict or disagreement rather than the too common "win/lose" resolution (i.e., where the manager "wins" and subordinates "lose" or vice-versa). Improved quality of decisions and staff motivation are among the benefits to be achieved through this approach.

A Participative Management Style

In general, the style of management addressed here places great emphasis on involving subordinates in solving problems; the manager or group leader takes the role of facilitating a group's problem-solving and decision-making instead of taking the role of solving problems and making decisions by himself.

Diagram 1 (see next page) presents a range of management styles. The style of management prescribed in this Guide is identified as #5 on the continuum. Since this style may be different from what is normally expected or accepted, a short explanation of its advantages and disadvantages follows:

First, numerous research studies* have shown that if a participative

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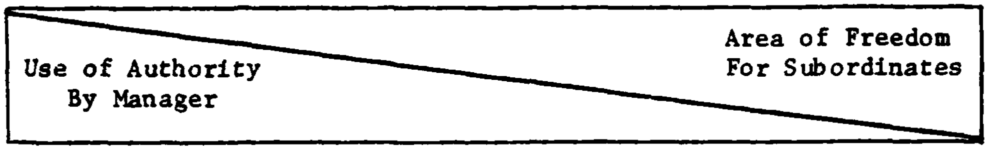
*Maier, N.R.F. Problem-Solving Discussions and Conferences: Leadership Methods and Skills. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963.
Varela, J.A. Psychological Solutions to Social Problems. New York: Academic Press, 1971.
Maier, N.R.F. Problem Solving and Creativity in Individuals and Groups. Monterey, CA: Brooks-Cole, 1970.

DIAGRAM 1: A RANGE OF MANAGEMENT (LEADERSHIP) STYLES*



#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6
Manager makes decision and announces it	Manager makes decision and "sells" it	Manager presents decision and invites questions	Manager presents problem, gets suggestions, makes decision	Manager defines limits, asks group to make decision	Manager permits decisions within broadly defined limits

Definitions:

<u>#1. Manager Makes Decision and Announces It</u>. The manager identifies a problem, evaluates alternative solutions, chooses one of them, and announces it to his subordinates for implementation. Little or no subordinate participation is encouraged.

<u>#2. Manager "Sells" His Decision</u>. Here the manager recognizes that his decision may not be accepted outright by all concerned. He seeks to reduce any resistance by indicating what subordinates have to gain.

<u>#3. Manager Presents Decision and Invites Questions</u>. Here the manager seeks acceptance of his decision by allowing subordinates to understand it through questions and answers.

<u>#4. Manager Presents Problem, Gets Suggestions, Makes Decision</u>. Here the manager comes to his subordinates with a problem that he has identified and analyzed, but has not arrived at a final solution. He asks subordinates for alternative suggestions. However, it is understood that the final decision is his. Subordinates are only expected to contribute their knowledge and experience toward better solutions.

<u>#5. Manager Defines Limits, Asks Group to Make Decision</u>. At this point, the manager delegates to the group (including himself) the freedom to make the final decision. Before doing so, however, he states the problem as he sees it and sets the boundaries (area of freedom) within which the decision can be made.

<u>#6. Manager Permits Decisions Within Broadly Defined Limits</u>. This situation usually occurs when problems are vague and require a high degree of freedom of exploration if creative solutions are to be found. In many research and development efforts, only broad limits are imposed on the problem-solving team; the manager in these cases, if he participates at all, participates as an equal.

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*Adapted from "How to Choose a Leadership Pattern" by Robert Tannenbaum and Warren H. Schmidt, <u>Harvard Business Review</u>, March-April 1958, 96.

problem-solving style of management is competently used and certain other conditions are met, it will:

1. Increase participants' commitment and motivation to carrying out decisions and policies,
2. Increase the quality of the decisions themselves, and
3. Improve working (interpersonal) relations among participants.

However, it has also been found that systematic training in the skills and techniques basic to this style of management have been neglected in education and training of most managers. Thus, the intent of this Guide is to present behavioral skills which will enable managers to be more <u>flexible</u> in their management style by <u>adding</u> a participative style (specifically #5) to their repertoire of skills.

A recent study* of 500 managers revealed that no manager uses the same style of leadership all the time. Most managers change their style depending on the situation. If the situation calls for an autocratic style, it is usually used; if the situation calls for a participative style, it is usually used. In other words, no manager should be typed with one style of leadership as he may vary his style repeatedly during the course of a single day.

<u>How do managers decide on which style to use</u>?

Effective managers often ask themselves four (4) basic questions about problem situations they confront:

1. Is it something that I can solve without considering ideas, opinions, or feelings of subordinates? Will the <u>quality</u> of the decision improve if I involve others?

2. Is <u>acceptance</u> of the decision by subordinates critical to its effective implementation (e.g., is fairness an issue)?

3. Is there <u>time</u> available to obtain my subordinate's ideas?

4. Am I interested in <u>developing</u> my subordinate's skills at problem solving?

The first two questions can be answered by listing out <u>issues</u> that affect the problem situation and consequences of any solution to it. The problem situation can then be classified as outlined on the next page. If there is any doubt at that point as to whether to be autocratic or participative, then answer the last two questions

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*Vroom, V.H. A new look at managerial decision making. <u>Organizational Dynamics</u>, <u>1</u>(4), Spring 1973, 66-80.

above. In general, it has been found that if time is available and you are interested in developing your subordinates, it always pays to include them in problem-solving and decision-making processes.

Analysis of Problem Situations

In considering issues of quality and acceptance three classifications* emerge:

1. High concern for quality, low concern for acceptance

Problems in which quality issues are important and acceptance issues are relatively low can usually be solved effectively by the manager himself. For example: engineering decisions, order quantity decisions, project budget decisions usually will not be successful or unsuccessful depending upon whether or not subordinates support them. When time is short, such decisions can probably be made by the manager himself with impunity. But when time is not short and a quality decision is required, a group decision can provide the highest probability of success.

Nonetheless, whenever a manager strongly favors a particular solution, he is in no position to permit participation without directly or indirectly imposing his views. Thus, it is best that he supply the solution and make acceptance his secondary objective.

2. High concern for acceptance, low concern for quality

Some problems offer a variety of solutions which vary little with regard to quality. The main issue involved in such problem situations is one of fairness or equity. For example, if a manager has five equally competent engineers and a requirement for one of them to work over the weekend arises, equity rather than quality becomes of great concern. Under such conditions, the manager should take the role of a discussion leader and present the problem to his subordinates. He would confine his activities to clarifying the problem, encouraging discussion, promoting communication, supplying information that may be at his disposal, and making appropriate summaries. His objective would be to achieve unanimous agreement on a decision that was a product of open and free group discussion. His role would be that of facilitator of effective solutions, rather than the solver.

*Adapted from Problem-Solving Discussions and Conferences: Leadership Methods and Skills by Norman R. F. Maier. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1963

3. High concern for acceptance, high concern for quality

In working with groups, it soon becomes apparent that group decisions are often of surprisingly good quality. It is not uncommon for a manager to discover that his group's solution surpassed not only what he expected, but what he could have achieved by himself. His fear that group decisions will be of poor quality disappears.

However, if the manager is anxious about the outcome, he is likely to interfere with the problem-solving process, rather than to facilitate it. For this reason, this category of problems should be handled by group decision only if the manager has become competent in using the skills and techniques outlined in this Guide.

In summary, concerns for quality and acceptance vary from one problem situation to the next. The manager should always use group methods of problem-solving if the following conditions exist:

1. Subordinates (staff members) have knowledge, experience, or special insights to contribute to the quality of the problem-solving.
2. Subordinates have a high concern about the solution; their needs or fears are important factors.
3. The manager has sufficient time available.
4. The manager wants to develop his subordinates.
5. The manager is competent in facilitating group problem-solving; he can control the process so that both quality and acceptable solutions are elicited from the group.

It follows that the less the above conditions exist, the less likely the manager will be satisfied with the results of group problem-solving.

Risk-Taking

Since managers are held responsible for the quality of decisions that are made, whether they are made by themselves or by their subordinates, they must be prepared to accept whatever risks are involved in delegating decision-making authority to subordinates.

One way to reduce such risks is for the manager to analyze problem situations, as above, and to state the "ground rules"* for solving each of them. Thus, if the manager intends to reserve the right to make the final decision himself, he should state this "ground rule" before the problem-solving begins. To avoid resentment and confusion, the manager must be honest and clear about what authority he is retaining and what role he expects his subordinates to assume in solving each particular problem.

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*See pg 26 for a fuller elaboration of this concept.

To demonstrate the value that group problem solving may have, the "Moon Problem" is offered for your consideration. It will enable you to experience a problem situation where the conditions outlined on page 5 are all present to some degree.

Moon Problem*

You are a member of a spaceship crew which has just crash-landed on the moon. Your sister ship is positioned 200 miles away on the lighted side of the moon. Due to the crash landing, your ship and all equipment except for the 15 items listed below have been destroyed. To survive, your crew must rendezvous with the sister ship and you, therefore, must choose the most important of the 15 items to make the 200 mile journey. Rank the 15 items in terms of their importance for survival designating the most crucial as #1 and the most trivial as #15.

Your first task is to rank the items by yourself on the left side below.

NASA Rank	YOUR Rank	Error Points	Items	NASA Rank	GROUP Rank	Error Points
____	____	____	box of matches	____	____	____
____	____	____	food concentrate	____	____	____
____	____	____	fifty feet of nylon rope	____	____	____
____	____	____	parachute silk	____	____	____
____	____	____	solar-powered portable heating unit	____	____	____
____	____	____	two .45 caliber pistols	____	____	____
____	____	____	one case of dehydrated Pet milk	____	____	____
____	____	____	two 100-pound tanks of oxygen	____	____	____
____	____	____	stellar map (of the Moon's constellation)	____	____	____
____	____	____	self-inflating life raft	____	____	____
____	____	____	magnetic compass	____	____	____
____	____	____	five gallons of water	____	____	____
____	____	____	signal flares	____	____	____
____	____	____	first-aid kit containing injection needles	____	____	____
____	____	____	solar-powered FM receiver-transmitter	____	____	____
	TOTAL:	____			TOTAL:	____

NOTE: Error points are the absolute difference between your rank and NASA's. (Disregard plus or minus signs, then add up total.)

*Adapted from Hall, J. "Decisions, Decisions, Decisions," Psychology Today, November 1971.

Your second task is to form up a group and rank the same items on the right side above. As a member of the group, share your individual solutions and try to reach consensus (not complete unanimity) on each item.

Here are some guidelines to follow in achieving consensus:

1. Avoid arguing for your own ranking. Present your opinion as logically as possible, but listen to others' reactions and consider them.

2. Don't take the attitude that someone must lose and someone must win. Rather, look for another alternative which will meet consensus.

3. Be suspicious of quick agreement. Explore reasons objectively.

4. Avoid conflict-reducing aids, such as majority vote or bargaining.

5. Expect differences of opinion. Disagreement can bring about better solutions through use of a wide range of information and opinions. Allow a single person to block the group if he thinks it is necessary.

Your third task, after you have finished your group's scoring, is to list general conditions which are conducive to group problem-solving. When all groups are finished there will be a general discussion of these conditions.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

OVERVIEW

The sequence of topics covered in this Guide follow the same sequence as that of a typical meeting: (1) Planning the meeting, (2) Conducting/managing the meeting and (3) Summarizing the meeting.

Planning the Meeting

Many meetings are poorly planned if they are planned at all. Some are called at inappropriate times, begin without advance notice, and are held under conditions where few can hear or take part without difficulty.

Thus, the first general topic addressed involves preparing agendas and making physical arrangements before the meeting begins. Questions to be answered include:

1. What are the objectives of this meeting?
2. Who should attend?
3. When and where should we meet?
4. What physical arrangements will be required?

Conducting/Managing the Meeting

Many meetings are poorly managed. Some are called to "rubber-stamp" actions that have already been decided on or deal with only a few individuals, while the remaining participants sit by in boredom. Some are conducted so that few participants can tell what is going on or what has been decided. In other meetings, participants' ideas, opinions, and recommendations are ignored or criticized before they are even heard out.

Thus, the second general topic addressed below involves how to chair meetings so that such negative outcomes do not occur. General functions served by the chairperson include:

1. Testing for emotional reaction (e.g., frustration) and handling it constructively.
2. Handling the flow of ideas and information so that free expression occurs and is not lost.
3. Stating or restating problems that emerge from the discussion so that defensive reactions are minimized.
4. Facilitating problem-solving and decision-making behavior so that consensus-based solutions are derived.

Summarizing The Meeting

The third and final general topic covered involves concluding the meeting by summarizing decisions and identifying who is to take what action.

Alternatives to Doing it All Yourself

Although it is assumed that the one person can handle all of the functions described below, some consultants* suggest that managers should not conduct many of their own meetings - because they have to handle four tasks simultaneously:

(1) maintain their leadership role by guiding the meeting
(2) make content input
(3) record the content
(4) facilitate group dynamics and process

Instead, they suggest that different subordinates be given the tasks of facilitating group process and recording information.

> "...the facilitator is a neutral, non-evaluative process (not people) manager. His or her role is to keep the group focused on the task, not to make content decisions or offer solutions. The role of the recorder is to capture basic ideas in the speaker's own words - on large sheets of paper in full view of the group. The other group members have a responsibility under this system too: to see that their ideas are adequately recorded, that the facilitator and recorder remain neutral and do not manipulate the group, and that they themselves focus all their energy on the problem (p. 19)."

This recommendation is worthwhile; but it does require that subordinates be trained to perform the various tasks. Since their instructor must be their manager, he will have to know how to perform all of the tasks himself; he cannot delegate acquisition of the behavioral skills found in this Guide to someone else.

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*Presley, J. and Keen, S. "Better meetings lead to higher productivity." Management Review, April 1975, 16-22.

PLANNING THE MEETING

Planning meetings involves answering several critical questions and then preparing an agenda which summarizes the answers to the questions.

Why Should There be a Meeting?

Objectives or goals of the meeting must be stated to clarify the purpose for holding a meeting (to avoid wasting others' time). Typical objectives include:

- --To report current status or update it
- --To exchange information
- --To solve a problem or make a decision that involves acceptance issues
- --To change attitudes or behaviors, especially if group morale shows signs of slipping

Plan to use your regular staff meetings to provide information, identify problems, discuss issues, pool ideas, and assign responsibilities. Try not to devote these general meetings to addressing a single issue. If there is an important issue which will take a great deal of time, call a special meeting for those persons directly involved and interested. These people can report to the larger group.

Who Should Attend the Meeting?

The group should be as small as possible (less than 12), yet include those who are responsible for or have an interest in the issues/problems to be addressed. Try to include those who will provide heterogeneous backgrounds/positions/interests or who will be affected by any solutions or decisions that may be made. Will anyone feel "left out" if not invited?

Input Side	Output Side

- Expertise
  - experience
  - education
  - field of interest
	- Acceptance of solutions will be important if individual will have to do work.

- Good idea man (positive influence) - Interest in or responsible for problems to be discussed	- Commitment and motivation will be obtained if individual has a say in solution or decision
- Skilled in helping meetings run well (process-oriented)	- Immediate understanding, readiness to plan how to carry out solution, will be obtained by involving individuals in problem solving.

When Should the Meeting be Held?

Avoid competing with other activities or meeting when you or your staff are under pressure. Further, it pays to space your meetings so that ideas and plans have a chance to be assimilated. However, if rapid change is occurring, more meetings offer a measure of security.

Try to give your staff adequate warning. Unexpected, unplanned meetings should be reserved for emergencies only.

Allow for at least an hour and try to finish within 1 1/2 hours. Less time prevents adequate discussion. More time leads to boredom and "tuning out". Allow some time for "socializing" and getting re-acquainted. Holding meetings right after coffee breaks often helps get meetings going smoothly.

Finally, the room should be large enough, have enough chairs, and be reserved before the time is announced.

Where Should the Meeting be Held?

Meetings run best when participants:

1. Are insulated from distracting noise.
2. Are isolated from distracting calls and interruptions.

3. Are able to move the furniture to permit close face-to-face communication (e.g., positioning participants in a circle or a U-shaped configuration elicits the most interaction).
4. Are able to easily see and/or hear audio/visual aids (e.g., a portable chalkboard or flip-pad can be moved so that all can see it).
5. Inhabit a physically comfortable room (e.g., ventilation, lights, seating, and room temperature are at appropriate levels).

What Should be Brought to the Meeting?

Meetings are more effective if the following communication aids are available to participants:

Written Aids:

1. Meeting objectives (either written out beforehand in an agenda handout or placed on chalkboard or paper pad)
2. Other handouts
3. Sign to identify meeting room
4. Name cards (tents) for participants, if needed

Physical Aids:

1. Felt-tip pens
2. Tablets
3. Pencils
4. Three-hole punch
5. Paper clips
6. Masking tape
7. Stapler
8. Water and glasses
9. Ash trays (place at one end of table to segregate smokers)

Audio-visual Aids:

1. Chalkboard (portable is best)
   chalk
   eraser
2. Newsprint pads
   easel
   tape
   pins/thumb tacks
   felt-tip markers

3. Slide projector
   slides
4. View graph
   transparencies
   grease pencils
5. Tape recorders
   tape
   extension cord

NOTE: Audio-visual aids are designed to aid in communications but they should be functional. That is, they should not: (1) impede or block communication by being so elaborate or complex that your message is obscured, or (2) stifle flexibility and spontaneity by being so rigorous or "canned" that "here and now" ideas are ignored.

Use of Agendas

Once answers to the above questions have been determined, prepare an agenda which includes objectives to be achieved and problems/issues to be discussed. Distribute the agenda to those who will be attending the meeting ahead of time.

Before the meeting starts, outline the agenda on the chalkboard or on newsprint (see Figure 1 below) so that all participants can follow the progress of the meeting. List items in the left column which you think should be discussed.

Begin the meeting by reviewing actions taken on previous agenda items, if the group has met before. Go over the new agenda for clarity. Ask if others have important items which they would like to see added to this agenda. Add those which the group sees as important.

Determine the top priority items. If some issues have limited interest, appoint subgroups to handle them. Put a number beside each item to indicate its importance and set the time needed to deal with it. Some issues will be purely informational and will require only presentation and clarification. Other items may require discussion of new policies or other forms of direct action.

Figure 1: Hypothetical Agenda for a Division Staff Meeting

	Item	Time	Action Required	Follow Up
3	Filing System	20 Min.	Due by 20 Oct.	All Staff Members
4	Evaluation Plan	45 Min.	Committee Study	Mr. Toy Ms. Smith
2	Obtain New Staff Member	15	Advertise Position	Mr. Henry by 1 Jan.
1	Holiday Party	20	Committee Coordination	Mr. Evans & Miss Hanks

Figure 1 illustrates a sample agenda which can be easily prepared for use at staff meetings. It is an effective tool for outlining issues to be covered, monitoring time spent on discussion, checking progress throughout the meeting, and insuring follow-up on each issue. The numbers in the left column indicate the priority order in which the group or its manager has decided the items will be discussed. An additional column, indicating who is responsible for initially presenting the issue to the group, might also be included.

During the meeting, observe each time limit and push for closure, especially on the difficult-to-decide items. Groups are often reluctant to take action steps and need prodding. Occasionally, when discussing a complex issue, a group will realize that it needs more time. In such a case, appoint a sub-committee to make recommendations on the subject.

As the meeting progresses, use the right column on the agenda sheet to keep track of all follow-up steps. If a policy has been generated, state it. If responsibility has been assigned to an individual or group, list names and dates by which action must be taken. If no decision was reached, state that, too. This procedure projects a clear record of progress to the group.

If all attempts at keeping the determined time schedule fail, follow the example of a certain African tribe. At tribal meetings, each member is given an equal number of sticks. Every time he wishes to make a statement, he must throw one stick into the fire. When his sticks are gone, he must remain silent. Variations of this practice - with pieces of paper, for example - tend to produce both enjoyable and helpful experiences.

When the meeting ends, have the recorder's copy of the agenda duplicated and distributed by the next day. In the period between meetings, remind ad hoc groups or individuals responsible for taking action to be prepared to report their progress at the next meeting.

CONDUCTING/MANAGING THE MEETING

Facilitating the Release of Expressions of Feeling

Whenever group discussion arouses hostility, causes its members to blame others, or to engage in emotional behavior unrelated to the discussion, it is evident that the situation has produced a state of frustration and that this condition has replaced rational thought. Since rational discussion cannot proceed effectively until the emotional aspects have been dealt with, the first step is to release feelings of frustration and hostility.

It is well-known that whenever a group leader evaluates group members, disagrees with their ideas, or appears surprised by their opinions, he unwittingly encourages them to be cautious of what they say, to suppress their feelings, or to be prepared to supply intellectual support for any ideas or thoughts they do express. Therefore, group members often will not be willing to discuss their true feelings. Nonetheless, feelings and attitudes can be dealt with for what they are--behaviors. Criticism suppresses them and builds up frustration; acceptance and understanding encourage their expression and reduce frustration.

A. In order to facilitate the release of expressions of feelings of frustration, the group leader should behave in an "open" and "non-threatening" manner by:

(1) Accepting expressions of feeling. This does not mean agreeing; rather it means that one receives another's feelings or ideas as worthy of attention and consideration. Accept not only ideas, but individuals as well. Do not cut in or interrupt the thought processes of an individual.

In addition to reducing frustration, "acceptance" of others' feelings brings about a relationship in which they can develop self-discipline, learn how to solve problems, and become more responsible and independent. Instead, many group leaders rely heavily on "non-acceptance" language--evaluation, judgment, criticism, commanding, and threatening--which turns people off and makes them feel resentful, defensive, or inferior.

Learning how to communicate "acceptance" is not hard. One has only to be able to listen and feed back "acceptance" messages. Their effect will help people to express their feelings and fears or vent their hostility and frustration.

(a) Passive listening or saying nothing is one way of demonstrating "acceptance"--just the fact you are listening is "acceptance" in a non-verbal way.

(b) Active listening is better yet. To get the "door open," to encourage a sharing of ideas or feelings, you might say:

"Tell me more."
"I'm interested in your point of view."
"Shoot, I'm listening."

These invitations do not cut off people like asking questions, giving advice or moralizing would. You must keep your own feelings or thoughts out of the way. What you are saying, in effect, is:

"You have a right to express how you feel."
"I might learn something from you."
"Your ideas are worthy of being listened to."

In most cases, you just need to offer such invitations and then jump back to get out of the way of members' expressions--after all you have just made them feel important.

(2) Feeding back expressions of feeling. This technique adds to "active listening" because it "keeps the door open". You reflect or feedback only what you feel a group member says--nothing more, nothing less. And in so doing, you ask for verification of the accuracy of your statement.

If you have a chalkboard or scratch pad handy, you can record your interpretation of what a participant feels. In this way, you not only slow down the pace of the discussion (a good thing) but you also demonstrate that you are actually listening and trying to understand him. Further, you let him know that your interpretation of what he said is open to correction. Thus, you test out your understanding of what he said. For example:

A participant says: "I'm really fed up with these frequent meetings; they're only wasting my valuable time!"

Possible feedback of this feeling would be:

(a) "You feel angry every time you are asked to a meeting" (?) (The question mark implies you are asking for verification.) or

(b) "You feel these meetings are nothing but a waste of time and that makes you angry and frustrated." (?)

"Is that correct?"

When feeding back expressions of feeling, you must be careful not to just mirror back or "parrot" back identical words; instead, feedback the feelings that seem to lie at the heart of the message: joy, hate, fear, disappointment, anger, pride, frustration, sadness, etc. Further, you must avoid even unintentional advising, interpreting, probing, agreeing, humoring, or reassuring, let alone preaching, blaming, threatening, lecturing or judging.

An example of "parroting" with reference to the above would be:

"You're really fed up with these frequent meetings; they're only wasting your valuable time" (?)

An example of unintentional interpreting would be:

"You feel these meetings are simply unnecessary and you're not going to stand for one more even if it means being embarrassed" (?)

People will free themselves of troublesome feelings only when they are encouraged and feel confident to express themselves openly; not when feedback says, "You don't trust me," "You don't accept my feelings," or "You think I'm at fault." Feedback of feelings lets participants use you as a "sounding board" or lets them "kick a problem around with you".

Furthermore, the mere act of expressing feelings, especially frustration or hostility, forces such feelings to be viewed more objectively. Unexpressed feelings are often vague and exaggerated. When they are verbalized, especially on a chalkboard, they become clarified and often are revealed as extreme. It is also more likely that after you listen to participants' expressions of feeling, they'll be more willing to listen to your expressions of feeling.

(3) Inquiring into guarded expressions of resentment. Don't be blinded by concentrating only on the line of thought on which you are embarking. Don't let "loaded" expressions go by unnoticed. The best time to explore these feelings is when they appear, spontaneously. Then use "active listening" and "problem posting" to identify the cause of the resentment.

(4) Introducing and tolerating silence. This technique forces people to express themselves and to take an active part. If you dominate the conversation, they will be encouraged to take

a passive role. Instead, use non-verbal behavior to elicit ideas and expressions of feeling (e.g., go to chalkboard with chalk in hand, ready to write).

B. Once you have reduced emotion, your next goal is to communicate openly and accurately. Small differences in ideas grow into large differences because human beings are inclined to jump to conclusions and to make judgments prematurely. To avoid jumping to false conclusions:

(1) Hear a person out by withholding judgment and by trying to understand his thoughts and feelings. In other words, don't cut another person off or "put him down" when he is telling you his ideas.

(2) Elicit further elaboration from persons who express unusual or vague ideas--get them to say more. A comment such as "I'm not sure that I understand" indicates a wish to understand and lets the person know he may discuss further his point of view.

Questions can be threatening, and when they approach a "cross-examination," they cause answers to become brief and guarded. For example, questions designed to obtain facts or evidence are not conducive to finding out how participants feel because they are probing and indicate doubt or disapproval. However, questions such as "How do you mean than?" or "Can you elaborate on that?" are OK since they encourage expression and demonstrate a desire to understand.

One method of eliciting further elaboration of an idea is by requesting illustrations. Specific examples are extremely helpful in promoting accurate communication.

(3) Reinforce contributions, especially initial attempts at formulating ideas. You might say words like, "I'm pleased to hear you express your ideas. Could you tell me more?"

Recognize contributions of the more quiet members when they voluntarily speak out. Reinforce their efforts with words of encouragement (e.g., "That's an interesting point."). Over time, if their contributions are recognized and not punished, their speaking-out will increase in frequency.

(4) Check with others for agreement, elaboration, clarification, or other points of view on any idea brought up. Use non-verbal signals, such as gestures of the hands, to solicit ideas.

Do not call on those who are quiet. If you do, you threaten those who have nothing worthwhile to contribute. Rather than listening to the ongoing discussion, they will become overly concerned about coming up with a "good" response.

(5) Post problems or ideas that emerge from the discussion.

By posting, the group leader summarizes the problems or ideas in his own words and writes them on a chalkboard. He does not attempt to solve them; rather his function is to collect problems and to assist each participant in clearly expressing his ideas or problems. Since he's using group resources and group responsibility to explore problems of mutual interest, it's unnecessary for the leader to defend himself at any time.

Usually, people are quite willing to work together once the risk of appearing incompetent (having problems) is removed. Interest grows as the discussion is continued because participants soon discover they have much the same problems in common. Ordinarily, each person feels that his problems are unique to him alone.

Posting problems is especially helpful in controversial situations. Hostility that is hidden within emotionally "loaded" problems can be relieved by their mere expression. Once problems are posted and accepted, they can be clarified, brought into focus, and made more objective.

Several techniques related to problem-posting are:

...to separate "confused" discussion into two or more different problems.
...to break complex problems into several simple problems.
...to combine two or more ideas into one.
...to define problems from concrete incidents or specific examples.

Why is Problem Posting so effective?

(a) People know they are being listened to; when their ideas are posted (written down) there is no way they can say they're not being listened to; the proof is in front of them. Further, by checking back with them, to let them verify that what was written down is correct (on target), communication is clarified greatly.

(b) Posting slows the leader down and keeps him from talking; he has to listen to be able to write. It forces him to pay attention.

(c) Further, if he happens to react defensively to any of the problems stated, writing <u>cools</u> him down--he avoids arguing or evaluating.

(d) Posting makes a <u>record</u> of what was said for use later on; what was said won't be forgotten.

(e) If a person keeps <u>repeating</u> his ideas over and over, he can easily be shown that he already has been heard, thus saving time.

(f) Exaggerated feelings can easily be <u>boiled down or reduced</u> to what they really are.

(g) Posting shows members that the group leader is beginning to problem-solve; that he is <u>leading</u> them toward <u>doing</u> something with their problems.

Stating the Problem

After a manager has identified a problem his next step is to carefully consider the best way to present the problem to a group. Success or failure in obtaining a good solution often hinges on this brief initial phase of group problem-solving. In general, he wants to prevent:

(a) group defensiveness--due to their feeling blamed.
(b) group hostility--due to their feeling threatened.
(c) vague or confusing statements--due to the manager's trying to either avoid hurting feelings or trying to achieve several objectives at the same time.
(d) manipulation--trying to steer thinking of the group into the manager's way of thinking without openly revealing his personal preferences.

Since it is common for discussion leaders to violate all of these principles, almost any use of them represents a gain--*so don't try to* be perfect--especially during initial attempts to use them.

Six Principles for Stating Problems to Groups

1. Incorporate Mutual Interest (within your area of freedom);

2. Encourage Freedom of Thought (no solutions);

3. Use Situational Terms (not behaviors);

4. Keep the Statement Brief;

5. Share Essential Information;

6. Specify Only One Objective.

1. Incorporate Mutual Interest

The effectiveness of group problem-solving is greatly influenced by the amount of mutual interest the problem arouses. To generate mutual interest, the problem statement should be worded so as to include needs, interests or concerns of group members. Organizational problems usually are not meaningful to subordinates. However, if such problems can be stated bringing group interests into play, then the problem will be meaningful. (Examples: Status, fairness, recognition, group acceptance, and experiences of success or failure.)

Area of Freedom. Problem-solvers often tend to overlook themselves as objects of change. Ideas for improvement are frequently expressed in the form of actions that others should take. This tendency is unproductive because it requires waiting for outsiders to make the changes you recommend. Problem-solving is most effective when it is in terms of "what can we do to improve the situation." It follows that problems for group decision should be, if possible, located within the leader/manager's "area of freedom." A leader/manager's "area of freedom" is limited by his authority or jurisdiction for making decisions. Each level of supervision has such an area, even though its boundaries may be clear or vague, large or small. Of course, a large and clear-cut "area of freedom" stimulates problem solvers to explore a wider variety of solutions. (Delegation of authority has its value at this point.)

Although it is good to state the "area of freedom," it is still better to stimulate exploration rather than impose limitations during the initial phases of problem-solving discussions. Later on, constraints and limitations on possible solutions can be clarified and confronted. In other words, do not limit the problem by stating it only in terms of "what can we do"--this would discourage any constructive suggestions that might be used as recommendations to higher ups.

2. Encouraging Freedom of Thought, Suggest No Solutions

When introducing a "problem," any solutions suggested by the leader interfere with free thinking. One group response is to accept all leader suggestions and become "yes-men." Often subordinates fear unfavorable reactions to their own ideas; so, instead, they just praise the leader's ideas. Another group reaction is to criticize their leader's suggested solution. In addition to limiting the process of evaluation to accepting or rejecting the solution, this places the leader on the defensive. Therefore, it is best to avoid suggesting a solution and leave the problem solving up to the group.

For example, suppose a supervisor poses the following problem: "How can I transfer a man who is popular in the group but disrupts the work of others?" It is obvious that this statement incorporates a solution into the statement of the problem. In essence, he is asking:

"How can I apply my solution to the problem and get the group to accept it?"

There may be many possible solutions and transfer is only one of them.

3. Using Situational Rather than Behavioral Terms

To state a problem in terms of individuals' behavior implies criticism or blame. Usually, the group will band together in defense--against the leader. When subordinates are afraid, typically they'll react with:

"We're not any worse than others!"
"What do you intend to do about it?"
"It's not our fault!"

When fear is present, the response will probably be slience.

In contrast, a situational statements asks "How can we improve this situation?"--it does not criticize or blame anyone. The leader requests help from the group, rather than standing in judgment of them. It is far better to focus on what was wrong than on who was wrong!

Altering situations is easier than changing people. However, people often will welcome changes in their behavior, if the changes are their own ideas. It follows that a discussion to change a situation may lead to suggestions by group members to modify their own behavior. Resistance to change is primarily a form of defense, and a group's defense is greatest when it has been criticized or attacked from the outside.

4. Keep the Problem Introduction Brief.

If it is too long, it may tend to prevent discussion, convey the impression that the leader is trying to manipulate thinking, or promote misunderstanding regarding what the problem actually is. If unclear, questions will be asked. If so, the leader should only clarify his original statement. If the leader is asked for his views, he should reply that he wants the benefit of the group's thinking. Such questions are frequently used to test the leader's sincerity and openess to alternative views. Most important, after the problem statement, you must pause long enough for a response to be initiated by a member of the group.

5. Share Essential Information

All facts in the leader's possession which bear on the problem should be shared with the group. In sharing this knowledge with subordinates, one increases their problem-solving potential. It is in the pooling of your information and experiences with that of your people that much is to be gained in group problem-solving.

However, the presentation of information should not be confused with attempts to influence solutions. The important thing is to supply information without interpreting it or suggesting how the information is to be used. At the least, facts and interpretation of facts should be clearly distinguished. Facts by themselves are neither good nor bad--it is in their interpretation that such values are introduced.

6. Specify Only One Objective

We can assume that the initial purpose of a solution is to achieve a particular objective or goal statement. If several solutions achieve the same initial objective, they may then be compared in terms of these by-products and their relative efficiency noted. If there are two or more objectives specified, confusion will be rampant or factions will develop. Thus, problem-solving should begin by having the major objective clearly stated so that all solutions under consideration can be compared with the same standard in mind.

GROUND RULES FOR SMALL GROUP PROBLEM-SOLVING

When you have decided to use small group techniques with a group of people, it is always best to let them know exactly what behavior they can expect from you and what behavior you expect from them. By stating such "ground rules" (roles and responsibilities), especially when both of you are new to them, confusion, surprises and fears are minimized.

Although you'll probably never be as elaborate and detailed (unless it's your initial attempt with subordinates), you might rephrase some of the following in your own words:

> I've sensed a problem which I think you might be interested in identifying, analysing, and solving as a group--but before we get started, let me outline the "ground rules" for this meeting:
>
> First, whatever decision we arrive at will be a product of the group. My general role will be to facilitate the group's arriving at the best possible solution.
>
> Second, consensus will be sought--this means the final decision must be acceptable to all participants--including myself--as I will share with you all constraints or limits that impinge on me from higher organizational levels. However, this does not mean that we cannot make every effort to overcome such constraints.
>
> Third, I am going to enforce these ground rules--perhaps even to the point of becoming an authoritarian--because I know that they guarantee freedom of expression for all and, such open communication usually leads to not only the best solution but one which is acceptable to all concerned and to which commitment is high.
>
> Fourth, if there are any fears that you feel or risks that you forsee resulting from solutions generated, we will take plenty of time to explore each.
>
> If you agree, in general, here's how we'll proceed:
>
> A. First, we'll determine how much time we have to problem-solve; depending, of course, on the complexity of the problem as defined.

Ground Rules... (continued)

B. Together we'll locate or identify the problem--perhaps break it down into soluble sub-problems. Initially, diverse thinking will be sought--any idea is OK, but solutions are forbidden at this point.

C. After an acceptable statement of the problem has been obtained, solutions or ideas towards solutions will be sought. No evaluation or judging at this time, however.

D. When solution generation is exhausted, solutions will be evaluated, one at a time, by listing their advantages and disadvantages (including by-products). Integration of solutions and consensus will be sought.

E. Finally, the decision will be summarized so that it is acceptable to all.

In addition to the above:

My role and responsibility as group leader (behavior you have a right to expect) includes:

- Enforcement of "ground rules".
- Accepting (allow time for, give attention to, and protect) all ideas, especially unusual/innovative ones.
- Rephrasing or summarizing ideas; placing them on chalkboard objectively.
- Testing for understanding of ideas by all.
- Allowing, perhaps even instigating, disagreement over ideas, but not attack on personality or ego grounds.
- Obtaining consensus before proceeding to each step in problem-solving sequence.
- Insuring that all who will be affected by the final solution (or who will have to carry out the decision) are included in the decision-making.
- Allowing no voting, except for inconsequential issues.

Ground Rules... (continued)

- Reinforcing behavior of group members which contributes to better problem-solving (e.g., building on ideas of others or integrating solutions).

- Trusting in all participants; assuming they are honest and want to do what's best for the organization.

In addition to ensuring that I behave as stated, your role and responsibilities, as group members (behavior I have a right to expect), include:

- Not jumping to quick solutions or answers; instead exploring fully at each step.

- Being honest, open, and forceful in getting your ideas out, especially any fears you have.

- Avoiding tendencies to blame; instead, concentrate on ways of preventing future problems or mistakes.

- Accepting others' ideas or disagreements as ideas to be explored, not personal attacks. Look for positive side.

- Speaking out spontaneously; try to integrate or synthesize by building on each other's ideas.

- Avoid arguing; present your point clearly and logically, but listen carefully to others' reactions before pressing your point.

- Not changing your mind just to avoid conflict. However, explore reasons for too easy agreement. Yield only to positions that have objective and logically sound foundations.

- Avoiding "I win, you lose" solutions; instead, look for alternative most acceptable to all - consensus.

- Reinforcing behavior of others which contributes to better problem-solving; ignore behavior which does not.

- Trusting in all participants; assuming they are honest and want to do what's best for the organization.

Procedures for Facilitating Problem-Solving Discussions

After feelings have been expressed freely, the group is now ready to start solving problems in an objective and constructive manner. Be sure to check with the group before proceeding. To begin, the leader should restate the problem in situational terms as he has analyzed it or as it seems to have emerged from the group discussion. He should then use the following techniques to facilitate the problem-solving discussion:

A. Separate idea getting from idea evaluation. First list ideas until they are exhausted; then start evaluation. Evaluation stifles unusual ideas because they are usually difficult to protect from criticism.

B. Disagreement with solutions offered should be turned into a listing of alternative ideas. In this way, the leader can make constructive use of disagreement. Use a flip chart to make the ideas public property and as a springboard for new ideas.

   Objections can also be turned into criteria for evaluating ideas. Note each criterion so obtained on a separate list labled "criteria" and say something like:

   > "Later on we will want to go over each of the ideas and evaluate them equally against these criteria. For now, let's concentrate on getting as many ideas as we can. Ideas that appear impractical may turn out to be suggestive and lead to better ideas."

   If disagreement is violent and non-constructive, the leader should turn personal attack into a situational problem whenever he can by restating it in more objective terms. For example, one participant says to another, "You clod, that's the most stupid idea I've ever heard". You restate this by saying, "Bill, you obviously have an objection to Joe's suggestion, but we need to stick to our ground rules. What criterion are you using to judge Joe's idea?"

C. Redefine conflicts between participants in terms of their needs, rather than their opposing solutions. Needs are often confused with solutions. Obtaining a new car is a solution; the need may be "transportation," "status" or "fairness". Meeting needs is usually possible, but implementing particular solutions may be impossible. For example: suppose two staff members both want to use the only available car. Typically, each thinks in terms of competing solutions ("I've got to have it."--"No, you don't, I'm going to drive it."). However, if active listening is used to learn of each other's needs, a mutually satisfactory solution can be derived.

Nonetheless, compromises or "trade-offs" will occur unless sufficient time is taken to fully explore needs. For example, one staff member suggests, "I'll take the car this morning, you can have it this afternoon." Although this solution may look good on the surface, such quick compromise agreements usually wind up with both parties losing something. A creative solution would meet the basic <u>needs</u> of both people, at least cost to each.

D. <u>Ask exploratory but not judgmental questions</u>. The latter may be threatening and may place people on the defensive. Try to raise problems that require further innovative thought such as "Is there an entirely different approach to the problem?" or, "What would be the direct opposite of that plan?"

E. <u>Test for consensus to determine if group members are ready to finish one step in the problem-solving sequence before moving on, or to determine if a proposed solution is acceptable to all</u>.

(1) Group consensus becomes possible when all participants contribute their ideas and feelings or when all share in the final decision. This means that when a group has reached consensus, it is sufficiently in agreement to move forward to make a decision. But consensus does <u>not</u> mean that everyone agrees on every detail. Consensus means that a sufficient number of participants are in favor of a decision to carry it out, while remaining participants who disagree at least understand the decision and are willing to give it a try without obstruction.

(2) Consensus decision-making is <u>not voting</u>; it depends on everyone's cooperation--not just majority rule. It means seeing that <u>every</u> member of the group is sufficiently satisfied to proceed.

NOTE: Consensus decision-making requires a great deal of two-way communication, therefore the group should not be larger than 15-20 members. Consensus decision-making also requires an active and enthusiastic commitment by those in authority (especially the <u>formal</u> group leader) to the ground rules.

(3) If consensus exists (and consensus should not be tested until there is a strong likelihood that it does exist), group members should signify this and go on to the next step or problem. If consensus does not exist, the process of testing for it will automatically produce further discussion in the area(s) of discord.

(4) When all participants signify their agreement, the person testing for consensus is responsible for making certain that anyone who did not speak out is encouraged to express his views. Examples:

(a) "Are we ready to accept Solution C?....
(Chorus of "Yes")
"....What about you, John?.... and Morris?....
"....Does anyone disagree?...."

(b) "Are we ready to leave this now and go on to the next ideas?....
"Are you ready, Arthur?...."

F. Gate keep. "Gate-keeping" refers to handling the flow of ideas in a group discussion. In a sense, you are a traffic cop--trying to prevent collisions of ideas, but making sure that all get to their destination (listeners) without undue delay.

The goal is to accept all ideas, putting those relevant to another problem or issue aside for the time being (back burner). One technique is to record "extraneous" ideas in the corner of the board with a pledge that they will be looked at next. However, it is important that the originator's acceptance of such an act be obtained before doing so--his ideas may really be pertinent to the topic at hand. Most important, you don't lose ideas in the heat of a fast moving pace. You get back to each, when the pace slows down.

G. Synthesize ideas. One member of the group throws out a "half-baked" idea because it just occurred to him--spontaneously. Then, someone else, because he is listening, takes the idea and adds to it, builds on it, sees what can be done with it. Then someone else adds to it--and before you know it, the group has come up with a really innovative idea--one which any single member could not have derived alone. It's almost magical; but it's really because you have created an "open," non-threatening, and non-evaluative environment which promotes such "brainstorming" by:

(1) Tolerating silence while participants are thinking,

(2) Preventing premature evaluation,

(3) Recording (posting) all ideas as they occur,

(4) Reinforcing idea-building behavior, and,

(5) Refraining from adding your own ideas until the ball gets rolling.

H. Summarize periodically. Periodic summarizing, when appropriate, serves several valuable functions of:

(1) Getting the discussion back on course (summarize main objective of discussion),

(2) Checking misunderstanding (restate long discourse in own words),

(3) Increasing communication within the group (narrows down range of meanings),

(4) Improving the leader's listening skill (forces him to pay attention and grasp meaning of what is being said),

(5) Giving recognition to members who have contributed ideas,

(6) Indicating and measuring progress toward objective,

(7) Separating a problem into its several parts (allows shift of dicussion to remaining parts of a problem by summarizing agreed upon points and disposing of them for the time being).

I. Collecting criteria. While the group is listing solutions and ideas, criteria for evaluation of these solutions often appear (especially as criticism). Instead of ignoring them, collect them on a separate list labeled "criteria". Better yet, list the criteria under the three headings: ACHIEVE, MAINTAIN, AVOID. This technique handles suggestions from those who are: (1) eager to get something done, (2) concerned with maintaining the "status quo", (3) fearful of change, or (4) over-critical.

Procedures To Facilitate the Evaluation of Solutions

There are a variety of approaches the group leader may take in facilitating the evaluation process. The choice depends on the complexity of the problem, the amount of disagreement, and the number of proposed solutions available.

A. When only two or three solutions have been proposed, and neither commands a clear-cut advantage over the others, examine the advantages and disadvantages of each solution.

To use this technique, the group leader writes one of the proposed solutions on a chalkboard. Then, he divides the space below into two columns, by drawing a line down the middle of the board. Over one column he places the heading "Advantages" and over the other, "Disadvantages."

Solution #1

Advantages	Disadvantages

It is then the group leader's job to obtain and list all of the advantages for that solution. When the group can't think of any more advantages, then list all the disadvantages. When finished, then go to the next solution and do the same.

Be sure to abbreviate each point made. The length of the lists is not important; the purpose is to publicly consider both sides of each question for later final evaluation. The value of this technique lies in its focus on only one side of each solution at a time. Instead of the group dividing into two or three sides, the group as a whole is asked to make contributions to one side at a time. It is not uncommon for the same person to contribute items to both columns.

Further, personal attacks are minimized with this objective and rational technique. Attacks or arguments can be reformulated by the leader into positive points to be listed under one of the two columns. It then becomes unnecessary for one to defend his ideas.

Thus, this technique minimizes "yes-but" discussions, where one side gets the other side to stop talking with a "yes" and then counters with "but" and proceeds to criticize their ideas. Instead of listening to understand, "yes-but" listening is to refute or "put-down". Ideas become "good" or "bad"; sides are polarized.

Once the positive and negative aspects of all the solutions have been explored, then a discussion of how best to avoid disadvantages, without losing major advantages can be explored. Such a discussion generates mutual interest for all of the participants and therefore becomes the basis for cooperative problem-solving.

A final advantage of this technique is that the lists obtained really contain criteria. Often, overlooked criteria can be picked up this way.

> NOTE: Attempts will be made by students in conflict to have the leader decide which solution is best. It is best to avoid such a temptation because it often sets up a "win-lose" situation for them. No matter which solution is chosen, one solution "loses" and so do those who proposed it. If there has been sufficient energy and emotion invested in that "losing" solution, those who lose may seek to retaliate in order to "save face". Sabotage of the "winning" solution is not uncommon and then the organization winds up also losing. Thus, it pays to resist becoming a judge; instead, resolve conflicting solutions by trying to have all needs met.

B. When several solutions have been proposed, a Decision Matrix should be used (see next page).

It is highly possible that 10 or more solutions may be generated by a group. A large number of solutions makes the previous technique too confusing and time consuming.

First, the leader should have the group combine similar solutions.

Second, if there are any solutions that all can agree are too impractical or impossible, these can be eliminated. (However, everyone must fully agree. If one person still wants any solution to stay, it must be included.)

Third, the leader draws a matrix and lists the solutions down one side. The criteria that have been generated previously are listed across the top, in order--"achieve", followed by "maintain" and finally "avoid" criteria.

As above, if too many criteria have been listed, check to see if some can be combined or eliminated.

The matrix should look like this:

Problem:

Sub-Problem:

<u>Criteria</u>
(Achieve, Maintain, Avoid)

Solutions:						
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						
5.						
6.						
7.						

After the solutions and criteria have been listed in the matrix, compare each solution against each criteria by using the key:

✓ = OK (yes, agreeable, acceptable)
? = Maybe (don't know, might be OK)
X = No (not agreeable, not acceptable)

Some criteria usually outweigh or are much more important than other criteria. If what appears to be the best solution receives a "?" or an "X" for <u>important</u> criteria, then answer the question, "How can we change the proposed solution so as to satisfy all criteria?" Solutions might be <u>combined</u>. <u>New solutions</u> might be sought if the ones at hand fail to meet all the important criteria. In any event, the goal is to decide on a solution both leader and subordinates can live with.

C. <u>During the evaluation, the group should explore supporting evidence.</u>

If solutions are based on <u>known</u> facts rather than on the <u>twisting of facts to fit preferred solutions</u>, success is more likely to be achieved. The failure to use what is known arises when no single solution's superiority can be proven because each is based on opinions; each person thinking his opinion is as good as anyone else's.

In order to focus on facts that are known, the leader should turn the discussion into an evaluation of the various solutions by asking participants to <u>indicate</u>, on a blackboard, <u>supporting factual evidence</u>. Solutions lacking factual support can be circled and set aside for the time being as secondary solutions.

D. Use stalemates constructively.

Conflict in factual evidence often leads to a great deal of fruitless discussion. A good way out of this conflict is for the leader to suggest that the views produce a stalemate since each is based upon acceptable but opposite supporting evidence. This method of canceling conflicting facts permits the discussion to proceed to a consideration of other facts that may support solutions under consideration or to proceed to the generation and evaluation of new solutions.

However, it is important to distinguish between conflicts in supporting facts and mere disagreement. Disapproval of a solution is not sufficient evidence.

This procedure is most appropriate when there is a great deal of controversy over a few solutions.

E. Exploring new problems created by solutions.

The most obvious new problem created by a solution is the cost of implementing it. All new problems which may be introduced by each solution should be explored for their feasibility of being solved. Since new problems created by solutions to an initial problem are often overlooked, a systematic effort should be made by the leader to evaluate all solutions with respect to problems they may create--including acceptance by subordinates.

Answer the questions:

"What might go wrong?"
"Who might resist?"
"What could keep this solution from happening?"

Procedures for Selecting a Solution

In some situations the superiority of a particular solution may be so obvious that there is no problem of selecting a solution. However, when several solutions exist, one must be chosen. In general, it is best to use a process of positive selection instead of resorting to rejection of poor solutions. This avoids defensive behavior and the need to save face by those who suggested them. As long as good alternatives are present, they have the best chance of being chosen--so poor ones need not be actively rejected.

A. Get fears out in open. Let more conservative members express their fears about any solution posed. By bringing fears out into the open, they can be realistically evaluated. Liberals can recognize them and suggest safeguards. Have conservatives realize that indecision is actually a decision regardless of whether or not one wants it to be.

B. Integrate alternative solutions. Take the best of two or more solutions and try out several combinations. By revising and integrating solutions, many novel ideas may occur. It may be easier to integrate solutions where there are many of them, because most will probably have common elements, and as a result, be only mediocre. When only a few solutions of good quality have been generated, it may be not only be more difficult to select the best, but also more difficult to integrate any two.

There are two conditions that call for attempts at integration:

1. The group has located the obstacles to solving the problem, but none of the solutions satisfies anyone. Here, you've got to get out of the rut - maybe by trying to locate alternative obstacles that can be overcome, or by combining two or more of the solutions on hand.

2. There is a marked conflict between two group factions. If they can come up with an alternative solution which integrates or incorporates elements of both sides, not only will its probability of acceptance be higher, but perhaps a better solution will have been generated.

Remember, idea integrations of solution patterns often appear suddenly - a product of the group's mutual interaction or reinforcement. You cannot force it, but you can be ready for it by keeping your mind open for new combinations and by reinforcing and protecting every new or cautious attempt to combine solutions.

C. Experiment. When two alternative solutions cannot be integrated, it may be possible to experiment with each and compare the results.

D. Strive for unanimity. Treat "failure to agree" as the responsibility of the group--not just the leader. The problem of how to deal with the group's disagreement should be dealt with. The group may agree to accept a majority opinion, to require complete agreement, or to have the leader arbitrarily make the decision himself. Nonetheless, the leader should make consensus (page 30) his objective. This objective causes him to become more concerned with protecting minority opinions. The leader should not show favor toward majority rule. Satisfaction with a decision is not merely the opportunity to participate, but whether one feels satisfied with the amount of influence he had in the final decision.

E. Protect minority opinions. In order to balance opposing viewpoints, the leader must protect individuals who are attacked, especially the weak. He should rephrase personal attacks so the disagreement is made one of differences in ideas rather than a conflict between personalities. Even vocal minority opinions must be protected and tolerated. Explanation of the problems and inconveniences that minorities may experience as a result of certain solutions can outweigh the preferences of a majority. At least explore them and thus increase satisfaction with the amount of influence exercised.

F. Reduce number of solutions. If many solutions are present, have members vote for the 3 they would like the most, or rate them all. Usually the number of solutions can be reduced in this way to a manageable number. However, check with the group before rejecting any solutions. Be sensitive to both individual feelings and group needs and steer a middle course. The next step would be to try to integrate those remaining solutions.

G. Eliminate any solution which is not acceptable. If one member of the group cannot accept a given solution, for whatever reason, it is best to eliminate that solution immediately. Only if the veto is obviously for personal gain should reasons be probed.

Summarizing the Decision

A. Deciding Finally

Deciding on a course of action is often quite easy--especially when it has been preceded by an open and honest exchange of ideas and reactions. Often a clearly superior solution emerges from such open discussion. However, even then don't think of that decision as necessarily final or impossible to change. You might say, "Are we ready to try this solution?"

Decisions that demand action are usually most satisfying and stimulate a sense of achievement, commitment, and responsibility. Otherwise, there is often a feeling that time has been wasted. If you fail to resolve a problem which is too complex, or further information is needed, treat this conclusion as a decision. It will be somewhat satisfying even though not an action decision. Emphasize points of agreement in the summary. To ensure progress next time, distribute summaries at start of the next discussion.

B. Translating the Decision Into Action--Writing Performance Objectives.

Often decisions are made which later are found to reveal disagreement over details. In order to facilitate accurate communication of a decision, decisions should be summarized on a flip chart, in detail, leaving ample opportunity for participants to add, delete, or correct any misunderstandings they have.

Once agreement is reached on a summary of the decision, the next step is to write out detailed Performance Objectives which specify:

1) What action steps need to be taken and in what sequence.
2) What conditions (or constraints) will be present.
3) What resources will be required.
4) Who is to do it (individual or group responsible for each Action Step).
5) How well it is to be done (standards).
6) When it is to be completed (deadline).

SUMMARIZING THE MEETING

After the meeting concludes, one meeting function remains--summarizing or recapitulating the results. The chairperson should write-up what was accomplished, i.e., what issues/problems were resolved, who is to take what action, etc. This write-up should then be sent to all participants and those who should have attended the meeting but could not, so that:

1. Everyone concerned will have a summary of what took place and can verify it for the chairperson.
2. Confusion over who is to do what and by when will be minimized. Again, details can be verified and corrected for mistakes.
3. Decisions made will be documented.

Summary Recorder

If convenient, it pays for the chairperson to assign the responsibility of recording a summary of the meeting, as it proceeds, to someone other than himself. The recording may be kept on notepaper or on newsprint flip-pad for all to see.

If the recording is done publicly, the recorder should write rapidly by condensing ideas or points into a few words. He should print large enough for all see and check with the group for verification of what has been recorded.

The recorder should note not only the main points made, problems/issues surfaced, decisions and recommendations made, but also any problems or major disagreements left unresolved.

If the recorder does not understand what is being said, he must not hesitate to ask for clarification. As he records, he should also try to organize the groups output under headings like "Problems", "Decisions", "Disagreements" or "Unusual Ideas". He should organize his report as the discussion moves along. If the summary is written on paper sheets, they can be taped separately on the wall(s).

Finally, the recorder should be as unobtrusive as possible. For example, he should not block the group's view or compete with the chairperson.

Process Observer

Groups always function on two levels: content and process. Content refers to the tasks or problems that the group is trying to resolve. Process refers to the group's behavior in maintaining communication in achieving tasks or problem resolution. Since most managers tend to focus on content to the exclusion of process, it pays for them to assign to someone else the responsibility for observing and feeding back summaries of the group's process behavior.

The process observer and his role should be identified to the group before the meeting begins. When he reports his observations to the group, normally during the last 5-10 minutes of the meeting, he should merely feed back what he observed, not what he thinks the group should do. Group members should always be allowed to come up with their own solutions.

If special end-of-meeting reaction sheets are distributed to participants, that data in a summary form can be used to corroborate the process observer's notes.

In general, the process observer should report on behaviors such as:

1. Were problems well defined before problem-solving began?
2. How were conflicts handled?
3. Were all free to participate?
4. Were any ideas/issues/problems ignored?
5. Was the chairperson responsive to individual needs?
6. Was time used efficiently?
7. Were there any signs of "hidden agendas"?
8. Was consensus reached at each step in the problem-solving process?

Feedback can be given so that defensive reaction is minimized; all that is required is that the following rules be observed:

1. Be behaviorally descriptive rather than vaguely judgmental. For example, instead of telling the chairman that he is "lazy", it is better to say "You reflected feelings only 3 times out of 10 opportunities". The latter statement enables the chairman to correct his behavior.

2. Be specific rather than general. Feedback is more effective when it describes specific behaviors. Saying "The way you talk makes others angry" is far less helpful than saying "When others were talking you interrupted them and 'put them down'."

3. Focus on behaviors that can be changed. Each individual has mannerisms which hinder communication. Some, like stuttering, can not be changed. Others, like talking too fast, can be changed through feedback.

4. Give feedback as soon as possible after behavior occurs.

5. Give feedback when its accuracy can be confirmed by others.

6. Give feedback when the recipient is ready to accept it.

TYPES OF DISCUSSIONS

Group-centered Discussion

When dealing with feelings, the leader's function is to encourage discussion among group members by promoting understanding and acceptance of one another. The leader sees his role primarily as one of withdrawing from the center of things and fading into the background after he has established a nonthreatening climate. He gradually shifts responsibility for discussion to the participants.

The designation "group-centered" describes the objective of such discussions. It is whatever the group wishes to discuss. The leader imposes no structure but permits the structure to emerge from the group itself. Satisfaction of group needs, solving of group problems, and resolving of interpersonal conflicts gradually become the agenda.

This type of group process has much to contribute to personal adjustments. It could become the pattern for gripe sessions, grievance hearings, and emotional upsets of a temporary nature. A further application would be its extension to work groups in order to mold them into more cohesive units. Meetings might be scheduled from time to time in order to deal with problems unrelated to job objectives. The leader in such cases would merely schedule time for the discussion of whatever matters the group would like to pursue. The justification for such meetings would be based on the assumption that a cohesive, well-adjusted group is a more valuable team than one that has unresolved emotional conflicts.

A group-centered discussion leader gets closer to his group and develops new insights into the workings of a group. Their needs, worries, satisfactions, frustrations, and relationships with one another become valuable bits of information which contribute to a better understanding of their behavior.

The leader may either withdraw from the leadership function and take a passive role or retain leadership while restricting its function to that of conducting the discussion in accordance with the group's needs and feelings. Instead of determining the topic, imposing a structure, or representing a point of view, his leadership function is to see to it that communication is facilitated, that hard feelings are dissipated, and that persons with minority opinions have a chance to be heard and understood. This latter role is an active one with respect to the discussion processes, but not with respect to the contents or thinking processes.

In both instances the leader is permissive with respect to what is said and what actions or decisions are made. However, in the latter role he assumes responsibility for the success of the meeting in so far as group satisfactions are concerned; in addition, he feels free to contribute helpful knowledge or information. In neither case does he impose his views or attempt to influence the decision.

Developmental Discussion

The purpose of developmental discussion is to introduce some structure into group discussion so as to increase quality and efficiency of group decision making. The leader's objective is to improve the group's thinking in reaching a better decision, not a preconceived decision or one that the leader wants.

Group-centered discussions are inefficient because discussion may follow a somewhat disorganized pattern. Developmental discussion is designed to systematize discussion of issues so that people will discuss the same aspect of a problem at the same time.

The first consideration is a common interest in a high-quality decision. Only problems where interest in facts predominates and personal opinions, conflicting needs, and emotional involvement are at a minimum, therefore, should be considered. If a discussion reveals the existence of emotional factors, it should be turned into a group-centered type, at least temporarily.

Some leaders may find that they obtain better acceptance for the structuring of developmental discussions if they ask the group to decide on the organization to follow. If a group becomes defensive or asks questions that indicate doubt of the wisdom of following a series of steps the leader recommends, this will be his cue to invite participation in formulating an acceptable procedure.

For example, if the leader suggests breaking the problem into parts or suggests problem solving by steps, he should determine whether there are objections to following such procedures. On the other hand, the leader might ask the group to assist him in breaking down the problem.

The important skill in developmental discussion is the leader's ability to sense when a structured approach is welcomed and when it is resisted. Groups will appreciate the injection of organization in a discussion when they are task-oriented, want to make progress, or are interested in an end product of which they can be proud. Under such circumstances a free or group-centered discussion would be boring, if not irritating.

A second skill involves the ability to make a systematic analysis of a problem. Unfortunately this same ability qualifies the leader for being a good problem solver himself, which in turn makes him impatient with respect to letting a group think their way through the problem. Such leaders must learn to use their talents to ask stimulating and provocative questions that take thinking out of a rut and develop an appreciation for the values of participation.

Turning Questions Into Problems

Some meetings are held for the purpose of communicating information and participation takes the form of questions directed to the leader. However, the leader often fails to answer the question asked because he does not understand the question. If in doubt, he should ask for more background or an illustration from the questioner.

If the question from the group involves approval or disagreement, he should try to determine the feeling or attitude behind the question by asking the questioner to elaborate what his views on the subject are, or by asking other participants what their views are.

Questions that are clearly loaded in a negative way, instead of being answered, should be turned into a problem for the group. For example, suppose you were discussing some of the dangers involved in using punishment as a preventive for accidents and a participant asked, "Suppose a man deliberately violated a traffic regulation. Are you saying we should let him get away with this?" If you answer "yes" you will lose the questioner's confidence and perhaps others'; if you answer "no", you will appear to be backing down and will have to take a defensive position. Instead you should suggest looking at the possible causes of a recent specific illustration of the topic. Such a formulation should include the whole group in the discussion. As a consequence, neither the questioner nor the leader is placed in a face-saving situation with respect to the topic under discussion (punishment, in this case). The group is led to think in broader and more constructive terms.

Most loaded questions can be made subjects for group discussion, and the very fact they are loaded means that the discussion will be lively. The objective of the leader is to treat such questions as discussion issues and turn them into problems for group discussion. Many questions do not have to be reformulated. Frequently, the leader need only say "Let's see how the rest of you feel about that?"

If the question is of a technical nature, the leader may wish to express his own ideas, but he should not try to prove he is right. Instead, he should accept any disagreement, encourage others to express opinions, and summarize the variety of different feelings. The expression of opinions, a knowledge that group members do not agree, and the feeling that ideas are not imposed or forced, do more to influence attitudes constructively than do facts or the opinions of an authority figure.

SIMULATION EXERCISES

Simulation involves interacting with people in various artificial situations which are similar to and "real-life" as possible. It is not like "acting" in the usual sense, because there is no "script"--you make up your own words as you go along--just so long as they support the basic facts of your given role.

It provides a fairly painless way of giving and receiving feedback, because it is officially an "experiment." Therefore, a critique of your performance need not make you feel as embarrassed as you would be if it were real. Furthermore, constructive criticism from peers is far easier to accept and learn from than that from superiors and/or subordinates.

How to "Act"

In acting your part in a simulation exercise, accept the facts as given, as well as assuming the attitude and feelings supplied in your specific role. It is most important that you reflect these attitudes and feelings with overt behavior. From this point on:

> Modify your behavior (attitude) in accordance with events as they transpire in the discussion.
>
> React to the "leader's" behavior in an exaggerated manner in order for him to get the message.
>
> When facts or events arise that are not covered by the given role, make up things which are consistent with the way it might be in a real-life situation.

For example, assume your role calls for hostile behavior. In real-life the only reason you would change to a rational and reasoning person, ready to problem-solve, would be if your supervisor behaved toward you in such a way that your hostility was accepted completely--(you were able to make a full disclosure of your previously pent-up feelings with behavioral indications on his part that he was listening).

If, on the other hand, he makes you feel more hostile or defensive, then act that way--again in an exaggerated manner--so that he can see what he is doing. In other words, react to his behavior with your behavior--don't just feel positive or negative towards him--show it!

WORK GROUP MEETING FLOW-CHART

This flow-chart summarizes the behaviors used to facilitate work group meetings. After the problem has been stated to the group or if the group surfaces a problem of its own, the leader should first check to determine if reactions to it are emotional. If so, then behaviors to facilitate expressions of feelings should be initiated. If no emotion is detected then behaviors to elicit group discussion and problem-solving should be initiated.

START

Sense Problem

(Difference between what is and what should be)

Prepare Problem Statement

Incorporate mutual interest
Encourage freedom of thought
Use situational terms
Be brief, share essential information and specify one objective.

State Problem and Ground Rules

Whatever decision is decided upon will be a product of this group; I will assist by enforcing the following problem-solving steps or ground rules:

First, I will state the problem as I see it. Then all changes, ideas, feelings, or associated problems will be accepted and posted. (No solutions at this time.)

Second, when an acceptable statement of the problem has been obtained, solutions or ideas will be sought. (No evaluation at this time.)

Third, when all the solutions are out, criteria for evaluation will be obtained. Each solution will then be compared against them.

In general, consensus will be sought at each step before going to the next one. Participants are to accept disagreement as ideas to explore, not as personal attacks.

Is Reaction To Problem Statement Emotional?

YES:

Accept and feedback expressions of feeling
Explore "loaded" expressions
Introduce and tolerate silence
Hear out, do not interrupt
Request elaboration, do not ask "why"
Post additional problems

NO:

Verify Problem With Group

Elicit ideas

Turn disagreements into alternative solutions
Redefine conflicts in terms of needs
Ask exploratory questions; do not judge
Synthesize ideas

Evaluate ideas

Get fears out in open
Integrate alternative solutions
Suggest experimentation
Strive for consensus
Protect minority opinions
Eliminate unacceptable solutions

Summarize and Set Performance Objectives

WORK GROUP MEETING

BEHAVIORAL CHECKLIST

BEFORE MEETING

___ 1. Prepare an agenda (list all objectives that are to be achieved, include problems or issues that will be discussed).

___ 2. Determine who should attend meeting (those who have ideas to contribute and/or whose acceptance of decisions will be critical).

___ 3. Distribute agenda to participants (include location and time).

___ 4. Prepare physical arrangements (tables and chairs, audio/visual equipment, writing materials, etc.).

START OF MEETING

___ 5. Review agenda (add new items, determine priority of items and time to be allowed for each).

___ 6. State "Ground Rules" for meeting (or each item on agenda as it is addressed).

DURING MEETING

Test for frustration or emotional responses, and if present:

___ 7. Accept expressions of feeling; objectify exaggerated feelings on board (post feelings after passive listening).

___ 8. Feed back expressions of feeling, ask for verification.

___ 9. Explore "loaded" expressions; post problems elicited.

___ 10. Tolerate long pauses; use non-verbal behavior to elicit expressions of feeling.

Handle the flow of information:

___ 11. Do not interrupt or evaluate; hear out; do not hurry.

___ 12. Request further elaboration or illustrations; do not question feelings by asking for evidence.

___ 13. Reinforce (recognize) contributions (especially of hesitant individuals).

___ 14. Ask others if they concur with points of view made.

___ 15. Post participants' problems or ideas in your own words.

State or restate problems that emerge from the discussion:

___ 16. Incorporate mutual interests (within "Area of Freedom").

___ 17. Keep solutions out of statement (allow group freedom of thought).

___ 18. Use situational rather than behavioral terms (no fault-finding).

___ 19. Keep to one problem (objective), be brief, and share essential information (facts, no interpretations).

Facilitate problem-solving:

___ 20. Separate idea getting from idea evaluation.

___ 21. Use controversial ideas as a springboard for new ideas or implications.

___ 22. Redefine conflicts in terms of needs, rather than opposing solutions.

___ 23. Ask exploratory, but not judgmental, questions.

___ 24. Summarize frequently, especially any progress in problem-solving.

___ 25. Test for consensus (do not allow voting/bargaining) at each step in problem-solving sequence.

___ 26. Gate keep flow of ideas/information.

___ 27. Reinforce spontaneous synthesizing of ideas.

___ 28. List criteria separately: ACHIEVE, MAINTAIN, AVOID.

Evaluate solutions and obtain a decision:

___ 29. Examine the advantages and disadvantages of each solution.

___ 30. Use a Decision Matrix for more than three solutions.

___ 31. Explore supporting <u>evidence</u>.

___ 32. <u>Use stalemates</u> constructively.

___ 33. <u>Explore new problems</u> that may be created by each solution.

___ 34. Get <u>fears out</u> in the open, <u>post</u> them.

___ 35. Suggest <u>integration</u> of or <u>experimenting</u> with alternative solutions.

___ 36. Strive for <u>consensus</u> of agreement.

AT CLOSE OF MEETING

___ 37. <u>Summarize</u> decisions in detail <u>to satisfaction</u> of all.

___ 38. Engage participants in writing out <u>performance objectives</u> to include: a) action steps, b) conditions/resources required, c) individuals, d) standards, and e) deadlines.

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